

About 5 years ago, Moira and I took the kids to Martha’s Vineyard for the first time. Traveling around the island, we got off the bus in Oak Bluffs to go to the beach when we noticed a crowd of people standing around on top of a bridge passing over a waterway. “Oh,” I exclaimed, “I think this is where they filmed that scene in *Jaws*!”

“*Jaws*,” said Moira. “What’s that?”

“What do you mean, what’s that? *Jaws*, it’s a classic movie. You mean you’ve never seen it?”

“Never seen it,” she told me. “What’s it about?”

“It’s about a shark with really big jaws who terrorizes a beach town one summer. And how they hunt the shark down and kill it.”

“That’s it?” she asks.

“Well yes, that’s it.” I’m thinking, what more do you need?

“Well,” she tells me, “I guess that’s why I’ve never seen it.”

So, when *Jaws* came back to the big screen the next year to celebrate 40 years in cinema, I made sure to buy not one, but two tickets to go and see it! Sitting in the theater we got to that last epic scene in which Martin Brody, played by Roy Schneider, stuffs a scuba diving tank inside the mouth of a great white and then fires six shots, hitting the tank and blowing up the shark just before his boat sinks and the shark swallows him whole. At that, Matt Hooper, played by Richard Dreyfuss, resurfaces from under the water, where he has been hiding out from the shark behind a rock. They exchange sighs of relief and climb aboard a piece of driftwood together, kicking their way to shore as the credits begin to roll. Which is when Moira turns to me now for the second time and exclaims, “That’s it? That’s the whole movie?”

I’ll tell you, I have never, not once, not ever been fishing in my life, but I love a good fishing story. Have you ever met a fisherman who didn’t have a good story to tell about his catch? The fish was this big! No, no, it wasn’t that big. It was *this* big!

In our gospel reading this morning, we hear a pretty good fishing story, one in which Simon Peter and his fellow fishing partners have been out all night trying to catch

something. Like I said, I've never actually been fishing, but I understand the night is one of the best times to go fishing. The waters are calm and the fish can't see the hook that is attached to the bait. All they see is a piece of worm dangling in the water. Thinking it's free for the taking, they swim up, take a bite, and gotcha!

I know, I know, it sounds kind of ridiculous—fish who can't see as well at night. Except this is exactly why Luke says that, after catching nothing all night, Jesus finds Simon and the fellas on the shore washing their nets. After staying up from sundown to sunset, they haven't caught even a guppy, and maybe it's because their nets were dirty, which made it easier for the fish to see the nets and to know to swim the other way. At least we can imagine this is the story they told their wives and kids the next morning when they came home empty handed. "Well it wasn't my fault. Somehow my net got dirty, and if my net had just been clean, I could have caught a swordfish!"

Every fisherman seems to have a good story to tell. Yesterday, at the funeral service for my mother-in-law, I told another fishing story, this one also about Simon Peter, but from John's gospel. Similar to Luke's story, John says that Simon Peter has been out fishing all night, and once again, he's caught nothing. Also similar to Luke's story, Jesus tells Simon and his buddies simply to try another location. In Luke, Jesus tells them to go out into deeper water. In John, Jesus tells them to try casting their nets on the other side of the boat. When they do, John records that the nets fill up with so many large fish—153 of them.

That's a fisherman story, because every fisherman knows exactly how many fish they caught. "How many fish did you catch?"

"152."

"Oh, well I caught 153."

I'd say it sounds silly. Who cares how many fish you caught? But if fishing is your business, then the size of your catch is also the size of your reputation, and the size of your bank account. Or, put another way, tell me your business and I'll tell you what you're tracking. Are you a lawyer? I bet you can tell me the number of cases you've won. Are you a professor? How many degrees do you have hanging on your wall? Are you a pastor? I bet you can tell me how many people were in church last Sunday.

I don't mean to suggest that tracking numbers is a bad thing. Every recovering alcoholic knows how many days it's been since their last drink, and every parent of a chronically ill child knows how many days it's been since the last trip to the hospital, and every widow seems to know how many days or years it's been since they were widowed, and every fisherman knows how many fish they caught yesterday. Some numbers tell us how far we've come, and some numbers tell us how far we still have to go.

I think it's worth noting, however, that in our story today, there are no numbers. Listen again:

Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man! Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.

There are no numbers, no mention on the part of Simon Peter of just how good a fisherman he is. He doesn't say to Jesus, "Jesus, come here and look. You've got to see what I just pulled off!" Instead, he tells Jesus to go away, for I am a sinful man. "A sinful man." I read this story and I think there must be something Luke isn't telling us about Simon Peter. For in the Bible, whenever we hear the word sinful, it means unworthy, despicable, undeserving of life itself. It's the same word we hear echoed in the cry of Isaiah, which Farrah read for us. Isaiah is in the temple when God appears in full view and it's all Isaiah can do to turn away in shame. "Woe is me! I am lost! For I am a man of unclean lips. I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the Lord of hosts!"

"How can this be?" Isaiah says to God. "Look at you, look at me, you are perfection, I am sinful, we don't belong together."

Surely though, this is not what Simon Peter means when he tells Jesus, "Go away, for I am sinful." I mean, the guy just had one bad night of fishing. All Jesus did was to tell him

not to give up. Try a different spot a little farther out and see what happens. So what if Simon had his doubts. He went with the idea, it worked, surely that doesn't make Simon a despicable sinner and a throw-away, does it?

No, it doesn't, and this seems to be the exact point Jesus is wanting to make when he tells Simon Peter, "Do not be afraid. From now on, you will no longer catch fish. You will be a catcher of people." The original Greek word here is $\xi\omega\gamma\rho\epsilon\omega$, which is a fishing term that essentially translates, "to catch and release." Jesus is telling Simon, "Look at you. How many bad nights have you had out there? 1? 2? And you come ashore looking as empty and washed up as your nets. I tell you, a life of counting fish is no life at all. You putter about out there on the sea collecting things that are going to be dead before you reach the shore. You dump out your pile and measure your whole life by whether you've got enough there to survive. I can tell already, you don't have enough there to survive. If you're basing your worth in this life on how many things you can catch and kill, you'll never have enough to survive. But I tell you this Simon, the number of fish in your net has nothing to do with your worth in the eyes of God."

You see, Simon looks at his net—empty—and he thinks of himself, "This is all I'm worth." Then Jesus tells him to cast it in deeper water. Simon tells him, that won't work. But when the net comes in full, Simon says, "This isn't what I'm worth." Talk about a guy with self-esteem issues! The nets empty, he's not happy. The nets full, he's not happy. And you know why? Because he's a guy who's only happy when *he* has filled the net. When he can say, "I did that. It was me who killed the fish and who has lived to tell the story." To which Jesus says, "That's it? That's what it takes to be you? Man, you're never going to survive in this world on that—catching live things and killing them. Come, follow me, and I will show you a better way. I will show you how to take live things that are caught and to release them back to life."

Three weeks ago, my wife Moira got a call that her mother was very sick, that she was being taken by ambulance to the hospital, and that she was not expected to live much longer. Moira's mother's name is Maureen. She lived in South Carolina. She moved down there about 20 years ago. Suffice it to say, life was hard for Maureen at times, she made it hard on those around her. In her end, she was rather isolated, and probably would have

died alone, except for the stubborn compassion of a woman in her apartment complex named Georgia who called 911 and then climbed into the back of the ambulance with her.

“I’ll stay here with her in the ICU,” Georgia told us on the phone. “I know you can’t get here, but I won’t let her be alone.” It was a Saturday. Maureen died that day. Two days later we pulled into Myrtle Beach. After going to the funeral home, we went to find Georgia. We wanted to thank her for her kindness. “I just sat beside her bed, holding her hand. At first your mom was very restless, like she still had a fight to pick.” I thought, that sounds like my mother-in-law. “After a while though, her restlessness became a peacefulness. I just kept holding her hand until it was her time to go, and then she did.” At this Georgia paused, as if to convince herself of what she was about to say. “I think it helped.”

Helped? I didn’t know how to tell her, “Georgia, I think you saved her life.”

Come, follow me, says Jesus, and I will make you a catcher of people. Amen.